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Passion made practical

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PASSION MADE PRACTICAL



Declan Ee of Castlery breaks down the importance of localising brand expansion and the difficulties of scaling customer service.

“The day I entered banking, I thought about when I could leave. I’ve always had different interests. You just find partners you can click with and balance you out. That’s how I am able to do so many things.”

Declan Ee may only be 35 years old, but the man already has more ventures to his name than many of us retire with. He started his first business venture when he was just 19 years old. At 21, he wrote and directed a musical — *Pagoda Street* — staged in both London and at the Esplanade. He’s been an investment banker, and currently splits his time between running his family business; co-running an investment fund in London; producing Billboard-ranking electronic music with partners; bringing up two young sons, who he intends to home school; and co-running Castlery, a runaway success of affordable, customisable furniture.

Founded in 2013 with just two sofas and a makeshift work desk, Castlery now owns their factory in Shenzhen, two showrooms in Singapore, and a 12,000 sq. ft. studio in Sydney. In May 2017, they launched Castlery Feat, a series of furniture pieces designed in collaboration with international furniture designers. In December 2017 — within only four months of opening in Australia — Castlery Australia reported a revenue of over AUD 1 million. So what’s next?

“
In today’s world you can’t just be one-dimensional — customers want more than that. That’s why cafes now are no longer just cafes; they’re also a shop.
”

Declan, let’s start with how Castlery has designed the customer journey. Before we started Castlery, we sat down to discuss the key pain points in furniture retail, and as far as possible, tried to use technology to overcome those experiences because we wanted to reduce human error.

There are two examples I can give. One: price transparency wasn’t there. We wanted to make sure that customers were seeing the same things online and in store. They don’t want to feel like they’re being taken for a ride, you know?

The other thing was customers not being able to receive products within the required timeframe. Let’s say the customer needs a certain number of items in one month, but the pieces are only available three, four months later. It’s frustrating! That’s why we spent months building our Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) system to let them sort items online by lead time. It’s information we already had on the backend but made accessible to customers on the frontend. That eliminated a huge pain point.

Many customers start their Castlery journey online, so we’ve tried to make it as holistic and pleasant as possible. We want them to have all the information they need to decide whether they are interested before they walk into the store, so we provide a lot of information on the website — colours, measurements, references, photos.

Once they decide they want to see the pieces in person, they can use our appointment system to book in for a one-on-one consultation with us in the showroom.

How has your service approach changed since you first started? It was very personalised when we started. The founders, the partners, the managers — we were all involved on the service side. And that was great, but it wasn’t scaleable.



Two years in, we decided to make things more systematic. We hired a customer service team, and to accelerate the learning process, we hired experienced people from the industry.

Providing good service is not always easy. How do you continue to be thoughtful in every interaction? To hear what the customer is saying, and where appropriate, give them something so they feel special? Sure, when something goes wrong, we can step in to fix the situation, but that’s not a sustainable solution, and it’s also not fair to other customers. So this becomes a question of how you empower your staff, and that’s not always straightforward. Our next step is to figure out how we are going to create that ‘wow’ moment, but at scale.



Do you know how you're going to do that? In today's world you can't just be one-dimensional — customers want more than that. That's why cafes now are no longer just cafes; they're also a shop.

Our approach has always been more reactive, but going forward, we're looking to strike up meaningful partnerships and hold events with brands that speak to the same demographic as us. Of course, it's also important to balance brand experience with the possibility of conversion.

You expanded to Sydney last year. Can you share some insights on building a brand there? One thing we learned is that there's real Aussie pride, so we worked on localising our pieces. We worked with local designers to understand what consumers wanted and how we could improve. It was a consultative process — we spoke to journalists, designers, influencers, and we listened to what they said.

We learned that customer expectations also differ. Singapore is small so customers expect things to arrive immediately, but Australians are happy to wait. For our first delivery there, the guy was shocked at how quickly we delivered. He actually told us the sofa had arrived too soon!

Australian customers are also focused on a number of things. One is design — they ask more technical questions, but I think that's a function of home improvement being a huge thing there. A lot of them have a shed or a holiday home, and spend weekends doing home improvement work like carpentry, so they have a grasp of these things. We don't have that here because most of us lack space.

Our Australian customers also ask more questions about where our items are from — where we get materials, what the factory's environment is like. We don't get questions like that here.

With all the travelling you do, what do you think of local service standards? With the hipster movement here, there's definitely more pride now, I think, but there's also a tendency to see service positions as just a job.

When we go overseas, we usually think service is better, but you have to remember they're also paid better, so of course service is better! You can see that here too — the really good servers tend to be well paid, and then there are those who are just doing their jobs. It's tough. I think a lot of industries and occupations here will need to pay more for service standards to improve, but that will also push inflation.

And service is a two-way thing. Culturally, there's this idea of just doing your thing and moving on instead of engaging. Maybe you're more open to chatting when you're overseas, but here, as a Singaporean diner, you think, *why are you talking to me so much?* So we don't encourage that behaviour.

What's next for Castlery? The drive for us has always been to try to scale because we knew going in that this is an industry that requires scale. We want to build a fully integrated furniture brand with a sophisticated supply chain and strong digital presence, combined with a retail experience that customers will come back for. There are many areas we can go into, but ultimately, to scale, we need to develop a long-term relationship with our customers. ✦